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Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0672
INFO AMEMBASSY DUBLIN
AMCONSUL BELFAST

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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y FOR PARA ONE OMISSION

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK, EI
SUBJECT: PARTIAL DEVOLUTION OF GOVERNMENT IN
NORTHERN IRELAND

REF: (A) DUBLIN 2312 (B) STATE 250930
(C) DUBLIN 2656

THIS TELEGRAM IS TRANSMITTED ON BEHALF OF AMCONGEN BELFAST AND WAS DRAFTED PRIOR TO SECRETARY MASON'S NOVEMBER 24 STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT (SEPTEL).

SUMMARY. POLITICAL TALKS BEGAN IN BELFAST NOVEMBER 21 ON THE POSSIBILITY OF CREATING A LOCAL ASSEMBLY AS A STEP TOWARD THE FULL DEVOLUTION OF POWER TO NORTHERN

IRELAND THAT MOST PEOPLE CONSIDER IMPRACTICAL NOW. OPTIMISTS ARE HARD TO FIND HERE, BUT THE SITUATION HAS SHIFTED ENOUGH RECENTLY TO JUSTIFY AN ATTEMPT. IF THE TALKS FAIL, THE ALTERNATIVE OF DIRECT RULE IN THE NEAR
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TO MEDIUM TERM IS NOT AN UNBEARABLE THOUGHT FOR MOST. END SUMMARY.

1. AFTER HAVING BEEN BURNED SO BADLY IN NI IN RECENT YEARS, HMG APPROACHES POLITICAL INITIATIVES WITH CARE. AS "THE TIMES" NOTED NOVEMBER 21, IT IS EASIER TO DESTROY REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS HERE THAN TO CREATE

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THEM. AT THE SAME TIME, THE BRITISH KNOW THEY CANNOT
RULE NI INDEFINITELY WITHOUT LOCAL PARTICIPATION, AND
THERE IS NO TIER OF REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT BETWEEN
THE DISTRICT COUNCILS (VERY LIMITED) AND WESTMINSTER.
THUS, THE QUEEN NOVEMBER 2 TOLD PARLIAMENT THAT HER
GOVERNMENT AIMS AT "ESTABLISHING A DEVOLVED GOVERNMENT
ACCEPTABLE TO BOTH PARTS OF THE COMMUNITY.." AND
SINCE FULL DEVOLUTION IS UNLIKELY TO BE ACHIEVED
SOON, SECRETARY OF STATE ROY MASON NOVEMBER 21 RE-
SUMED A FIRST ROUND OF TALKS WITH THE FOUR MAJOR NI
PARTIESABOUT AN INTERIM, PARTIAL DEVOLUTION OF POWERS
TOA POPULARLY ELECTED REGIONAL BOYD (REFTELS).

2. IN THE FIRST YEAR OF HIS OFFICE, MR. MASON CONCEN-
TRATED ON GETTING CONTROL OF THE SECURITY SITUATION.
THERE SEEMED TO BE NO PROSPECT FOR POSITIVE POLITICAL
MOVEMENT, BUT HE TRIED TO MAKE A FEW POLITICAL DICTA
QUITE CLEAR: THE UK WILL NOT WITHDRAW FROM NI AS LONG
AS A MAJORITY WANTS IT TO STAY. HE WILL NOT ACCEPT
AS A BASIS FOR DEVOLUTION THE MAJORITY REPORT OF THE
FOUR-PARTY UNIONIST COALITION AT THE 1975 CONSTITU-
TIONAL CONVENTION -- I.E., NO RULE BY SIMPLE MAJORITY.
CONVERSELY, LOCAL RULE MUST BE BY "POWER-SHARING" --
A PHRASE THAT IS NOW COUNTERPRODUCTIVE AND HAS BEEN RE-
PLACED IN NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE (NIO) IDIOM BY
"WIDESPREAD ACCEPTANCE" OR "PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENT."
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3. PARTY POSITIONS: OF THE DOZEN AND A HALF PARTIES
THAT PARTICIPATED IN LAST MAY'S DISTRICT COUNCIL
ELECTIONS, ONLY FOUR WON ENOUGH VOTES TO JUSTIFY IN-
CLUSION IN MR. MASON'S TALKS. THEIR POSITIONS ARE SO
VARIANT ON AT LEAST ONE ESSENTIAL POINT THAT MANEUVERING
ROOM IS SMALL, AND OPTIMISM ON THE TALKS SCARCE:
(A) OFFICIAL UNIONISTS (34 PERCENT OF COUNCIL SEATS
IN MAY): A FUNDAMENTAL DESIRE TO REMAIN IN THE UK BUT
NOT TOTAL INTEGRATION, STRONG SUSPICION OF HMG RELIA-
BILITY AND MOTIVES, REJECTION OF POWER-SHARING AT
CABINET LEVEL ("WILL NOT SIT IN CABINET WITH THOSE WHO
DO NOT OWE ALLEGIANCE TO THE UK"), NO PROPORTIONAL
REPRESENTATION, AND HMG TO MAKE REALISTIC PROPOSALS FOR
NI'S POLITICAL FUTURE.
MR. MASON'S INSISTENT REJECTION OF THE MAJORITY CON-
VENTION REPORT APPARENTLY HAS RESULTED IN WHAT MAY BE
A SIGNIFICANT SHIFT IN THE OFFICIAL UNIONIST POSITION.
PARTY LEADERS HINTED AT THE SHIFT WHEN THEY SAW MASON
IN EARLY OCTOBER, AND HAVE SINCE MADE IT MORE EXPLICIT.
THEY STILL INSIST ON EVENTUAL STRAIGHT MAJORITY RULE,
BUT DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN THE INTERIM AND FULL DEVOLU-

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TION OF AUTHORITY: A FORM OF POWER-SHARING WOULD "PROBABLY" BE POSSIBLE IN THE FORMER, AS LONG AS THE END RESULT IS CLEARLY IN VIEW AND THERE IS NO RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT POWER.

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(B) SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND LABOUR PARTY (21 PERCENT): THE OTHER PARTIES REACTED WITH VARYING DEGREES OF ACERBITY TO WHAT THEY SAW AS THE SDLP'S DISCOURTESY TO THE QUEEN IN AUGUST, AND ITS SEPTEMBER RE-EMPHASIS ON NI'S AGREED, GRADUAL UNITY WITH THE REPUBLIC. THE PARTY INSISTS ON POWER-SHARING, IN ORDER TO PROTECT MINORITY RIGHTS AND PARTICIPATION PENDING UNITY, AND NO RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT POWER. IT WILL NEGOTIATE ON ANY REASONABLE BASIS BUT ASKS THE NIO TO STATE THE BRITISH POSITION. THE SDLP'S POSITION MAY BE STRENGTHENED -- OR COMPLICATED -- BY IRISH REPUBLIC LOBBYING.
(C) DEMOCRATIC UNIONISTS (14 PERCENT): PAISLEY TAKES THE HARDEST LINE AGAINST INTERIM DEVOLUTION OR ANY FINAGLING WITH MAJORITY CONTROL. HE IS PROBABLY AS SUSPICIOUS OF HMG AS OF THE SDLP. HE MAY NEVERTHELESS BELIEVE DUP STRENGTH IS INCREASING, AND THEREFORE BE ATTRACTED TO ELECTIONS AND A NEW FORUM.
(D) ALLIANCE (13 PERCENT): THE ONLY ONE OF THE FOUR PARTIES BASED ON BOTH NI'S COMMUNITIES. IT WILL NOT

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COALESCE EITHER WITH THE OFFICIAL UNIONISTS OR THE
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SDLP AGAINST THE OTHER. IT WILL TALK TO MR. MASON AND WILL NOT HOLD OUT ON DETAILS BUT INSISTS THAT: TALKS BE MEANINGFUL AND INVOLVE ACTUAL POWER, NO PROTESTANT MAJORITY RUN THE NEW ASSEMBLY, AND THE INTERIM SYSTEM CLEARLY BE A STEP TOWARD FULL DEVOLUTION.

4. POWER OF VETO: BOTH THE OFFICIAL UNIONISTS AND THE SDLP HAVE VETOES. AN ALLIANCE PARTY ACTING ITS REASONABLE SELF PROBABLY HAS ONE ALSO. HMG MIGHT BE CONTENT TO LEAVE OUT THE DUP PER SE, BUT THE QUESTION IS WHETHER THE OFFICIAL UNIONISTS COULD AFFORD A HOSTILE DUP ON THEIR FLANK.

5. FORMAT: MR. MASON SAW THE UNIONISTS, SDLP, ALLIANCE, AND DUP SEPARATELY AND WE EXPECT THE NEXT STAGE OF TALKS CONDUCTED BY NIO OFFICIALS TO BE ON THE SAME BASIS. WE EXPECT HMG WILL TRY TO DRAW OUT THE POLITICIANS AND REVEAL ITS OWN IDEAS (REF C) SLOWLY. AS THE TALKS CONTINUE, THE NIO WILL PRESUMABLY TRY TO KEEP THE PARTIES PARALLEL, SO THAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT THE SAME THINGS WHEN -- AND IF -- THEY ALL GET TOGETHER.

6. PROSPECTS: THE KEY ISSUE IS POWER-SHARING. THE THREE PARTIES WHO APPEAR OPEN TO INTERIM DEVOLUTION (ALL BUT THE DUP) AGREE THAT AN ASSEMBLY MUST HAVE REAL POWER. AS PUT BY THE "GUARDIAN" NO-VEMBER 11, THE DEGREE OF PARTNERSHIP POSSIBLE IS IN INVERSE PROPORTION TO THE POWER GIVEN TO AN ASSEMBLY. SO THE NIO CONFRONTS THE DELICATE TASK OF FINDING THE COINCIDENCE OF THE MAXIMUM POSSIBLE PARTNERSHIP (WHICH THE SDLP WANTS) AND THE MAXIMUM POSSIBLE POWER (WHICH ALL WANT).
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7. MIRRORS WILL LIKELY BE OF LIMITED USE IN THIS OPERATION: THE POLITICIANS WILL BE ATTRACTED TO AN ASSEMBLY WHERE THEY WILL BE PAID FOR DOING THEIR THING, BUT MUCH ILL FEELING REMAINS. MOREOVER, THEY WILL BE LOOKING OVER THEIR SHOULDERS AT THE HARD-LINERS IN THEIR CONSTITUENCIES, AND THE UNIONISTS IN ADDITION AT THE DUP. IF THE TALKS SHOW NO PROGRESS, THEN LITTLE

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LASTING HARM MAY BE DONE. DIRECT RULE AT LEAST ASSURES THE UNIONISTS THAT THE UNION WILL BE PRESERVED, AND FOR THE SDLP AT LEAST IN THE SHORT RUN THAT THEIR RIGHTS WILL BE PROTECTED. DIRECT RULE UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE PRESENT SECRETARY OF STATE AND HIS TEAM IS LIKELY TO BE "FAIR AND SENSITIVE," AS DEFINED BY THE PRIME MINISTER DURING THE DEBATE AFTER THE QUEEN'S SPEECH TO PARLIAMENT. IF THE CURRENT EFFORT FAILS, ANOTHER INITIATIVE WOULD HAVE TO AWAIT FURTHER DEVELOPMENT IN THE LOCAL SITUATION.

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